

A Curriculum Guide for

Totally Joe

By James Howe

About the Book

Assigned to write his “alphabiography”—a chronicle of his life with chapters headed from A to Z—seventh-grader Joe Bunch ponders his predicament. This English assignment sounds boring. What if he tells the truth and someone besides his teacher reads it?! And the part about ending each chapter with a “life lesson” seems totally lame. But as Joe’s chapters build from “A” for his best friend, Addie, to “F” for family to “T” for turning thirteen and beyond, he finds out that “Alphabiographies should be full of *italics*, CAPITAL LETTERS, and exclamation points! (Just like life!)”

The unique personality at the center of Howe’s lively character study is captured through the novel’s unusual format: an “alphabiography” peppered with pages of transcribed dialogue, instant messages, and chapter-ending life lessons. But what is most striking about *Totally Joe* is not the standout hair, apparel, and attitude of its flamboyant protagonist but the poignant similarities between his experience and that of all teens as they strive to be true to themselves in a junior high world where following the crowd—and not one’s own heart—often seems to be the easiest and least painful path. Joe Bunch is an honest and likable gay young adult and an inspiration to anyone struggling to feel good about his or her identity. And add to that, this book is laugh-out-loud funny!

Discussion Questions

The discussion questions below align with the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.7.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6) (W.7.4, 9) (SL.7.1, 4) (RI.7.1)

1. In his opening letter to Mr. Daly, Joe writes, “Let’s face it, I’m not exactly your average Joe, and I get called plenty of names because of it.” What names does Joe get called? What does Joe do and say that make him other than average? How does Joe feel about these qualities of his personality?
2. What does Joe like about each of his three best friends? What do Addie, Skeezie, and Bobby do and say that make them “not exactly average”? Why do they call themselves the Gang of Five?
3. In the chapter “B Is for Boy,” what does Joe describe as the qualities of a “guy-guy”? Do you think his description is accurate? What have been the results of Joe’s occasional attempts to behave like a guy-guy? Have you ever tried to act like a certain type of person? Describe the experience.
4. Describe Colin Briggs. How does Joe find out that his feelings for Colin are

reciprocated? What obstacles stand in the way of their relationship? Compare and contrast Joe and Colin's relationship with those of Addie and DuShawn, and Bobby and Kelsey. What frustrations does Joe feel when he observes his friends' romances? What might you say to Joe if he were to share such frustrations with you?

5. Why is Joe's favorite movie *E.T.*? In what way does he identify with this extraterrestrial character? What (or where) is Wisteria? Have you ever felt like you really didn't belong—as if you came from another planet? Explain.

6. Write down quotes that show that Joe is rather matter-of-fact about not being in the popular group, about kids like Kevin Hennessey existing in the world, and about not everyone being accepting of gay people. How does he feel about these things? Why doesn't he let these things bother him?

7. Who are the people in Joe's world that make him feel accepted and just right the way he is? What do they do to make Joe feel good about himself?

8. Compare and contrast Joe's parents with Colin's parents. In what ways does each boy's family have an effect on his ability to be himself?

9. In Chapter G, Addie asks her friends: "If you love somebody, do you go along with them even if you don't feel right about it?" Answer her question. In what way does Joe go along with Colin despite disagreeing with his position?

10. Have you ever gone along with an action or opinion contrary to your own because of your feelings (romantic or otherwise) for another person? Were you ever able to share your true opinion with this person? Can a relationship stay strong if one of the people in it is suppressing his or her true feelings or opinions? Discuss with another person your thoughts on this topic.

11. What characters do Joe and Colin dress up as on Halloween? Research these two characters to better understand what happens in the novel.

12. Explain what happens to Joe and Colin's relationship during and after Halloween. What does Joe learn from the demise of his relationship with Colin?

13. What life lesson does Joe record at the end of the "Merry Christmas" chapter in which he comes out to his family? Do you believe this lesson is true for Joe and for yourself? Explain your answer.

14. In Chapter N, Joe wonders if Kevin or Zachary might be gay. What prompts him to wonder about these individuals? Why do you think some people are more comfortable with themselves than others are?

15. Addie proposes to start a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club at school. What people object to Addie's proposal? What people support this club? How does this make Addie

feel?

16. Why are no name-calling, a gay-straight alliance, and other tolerance campaigns or clubs a good idea? Why is tolerance important? Is your school a place of tolerance where you feel you can be yourself? Answer these questions in a group, and make sure you listen to others' opinions.

17. What gifts does Joe receive from his aunt Pam, his grandparents, and Colin that show their support and care for him? Have you ever received a gift that showed you how much a friend or relative understood you? How did this make you feel? Have you ever chosen or given a gift to show another person your support? In writing, describe a time when you received or gave such a gift.

18. How does Joe finally defeat Kevin Hennessey in Chapter V? What insights into Kevin's personality are revealed in the later chapters of the novel?

19. Tell a reading partner how Joe describes Zachary's mannerisms. What comments does Joe make about them? How has his experience with Colin affected Joe's thoughts about and behavior toward Zachary?

20. Joe prides himself on being a funny guy. Cite scenes and quotes that you find humorous.

Research and Writing Activities

These activities align with the following Common Core Standards:
(RL.7.1, 2, 5) (W.7.1, 2, 4, 9) (SL.7.1, 2, 4) (L.7.4) (RI.7.10)

1. **Literary Forms.** In *Totally Joe*, James Howe employs a clever literary form: a first-person "alphabiography." What impact does this structure have on your understanding of the novel and its main characters? What other unique literary elements can be found in the novel? Do you feel these literary forms help you understand Joe's character better than a more traditional, linear novel? Why or why not? Outline twenty-six chapter headings for your own alphabiography. Or write a dialogue transcript, collection of life lessons, or sequence of instant messages to describe an important event in your life or an aspect of your personality.

2. **Character Analysis.** Joe belongs to a small circle of friends, none of whom fit the mainstream for one reason or another. Which member of the Gang of Five do you identify with most closely? Examine the traits of this one character. Then write a paragraph explaining why you feel connected to that character.

3. **Present a Life Lesson.** Choose your favorite end-of-chapter life lesson from *Totally Joe*. Make a poster (either online or hard copy) presenting how this lesson relates to the book. What quotes and scenes exemplify the life lesson? Make another poster that demonstrates how this life lesson relates to you and/or to the real world. Present your

poster to an audience.

4. The Theme of Appearances, Impressions, and Labels. In *Totally Joe*, everyone seems to have a label based mostly on how one appears on the outside. Kevin is the troublemaker, Kelsey is shy, Jeff is a guy-guy, etc. Go through a magazine or catalogue, either online or hard copy, and look at various people in articles and advertisements. Write a quick character sketch for four to five of these people based on their clothing, posture, and any other clues offered by the pictures. Invite friends or classmates to characterize the same pictures. Do they reach the same conclusions about these characters? Why or why not? Discuss whether the way a person looks, speaks, gestures, or moves makes one assume that he or she will be a certain type of person. What conclusions do you draw from this exercise? How do these conclusions apply to the characters in the novel?

5. Discussing the Theme and Meaning of Tolerance. The Hennesseys believe that it is against their religion to allow a GSA on campus. The Carles and the Bunches are staunchly for having this club on campus. Using multiple sources, determine and clarify what it means to be *tolerant*. Is it possible to be tolerant to both opinions concerning the GSA at PFMS? With friends or classmates, hold a debate or round-table discussion about why is it sometimes hard to be tolerant. What risks are involved in accepting others for who they are? Can a school where everyone is tolerant and compassionate actually exist? Why or why not?

6. Using Research to Practice Tolerance. Create a plan for making your school a more tolerant and accepting place. Your plan might include a “No Name-Calling Day” (visit www.nonamecallingweek.org); a GSA club; and/or a clear code of penalties for intolerance and discrimination. Go to the library or online to find more ideas for improving tolerance and embracing diversity in your community. Try www.GLSEN.org (the website of GLSEN: the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) or pbs.org/inthemix/ (a PBS web page featuring the “What’s Normal” series about teens and stereotypes plus transcripts from other programs featuring gay teens). Another good resource is www.teachingtolerance.org. Determine how you will educate everyone in your school about this plan, and how you will get feedback from staff, students, and your school community prior to putting this plan into action.

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