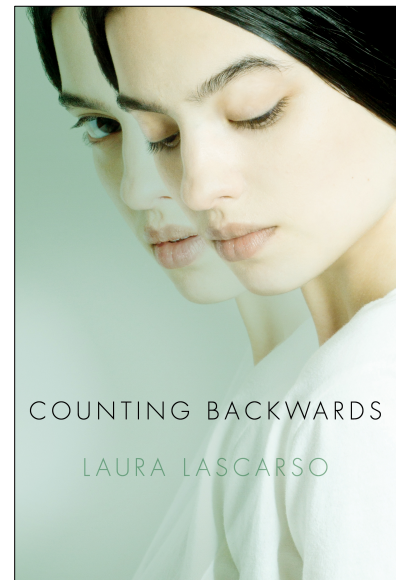


A Curriculum Guide for
COUNTING BACKWARDS by Laura Lascarso
Common Core for Writing and Language, grades 9-12

About the Book

Three weeks ago I tried to run away from home. Now all I want is to go back.

Sunny Meadows is anything but the easy way out. After being sentenced to this therapeutic boarding school after getting into trouble for stealing a car, seventeen-year-old Taylor Truwell has to fight hard just to cling to her sanity as she battles her parents, her therapist, and a group of particularly nasty fellow patients, the Latina Queens. But even as Taylor struggles to hold on to her stubborn former self, she finds herself relenting as she lets in two unlikely friends—Margo, a former child star and arsonist, and AJ, a mysterious boy who doesn't speak. Sunny Meadows goes against everything Taylor stands for. But is it the only place that can save her?



Key Ideas and Details

1. At the opening of *Counting Backwards*, we witness an exchange between Taylor and her father. How would you describe their relationship? What evidence can you find to support your statement? Where do you find similar relationship dynamics—in your own life, media, and/or literature?
2. Margo introduces herself to Taylor as her peer mentor, but they also become close friends. In what ways does Margo act as a mentor? Why does Taylor prefer Margo above some of the other young women at Sunny Meadows?
3. Describe the time-out room. In Chapter 7, does Taylor deserve to be sent into a time-out room? Why or why not?
4. In the first half of the novel, Taylor is uncooperative in therapy. In your opinion, is she justified in acting that way? What advice would you give her?
5. Self-perception is a theme in *Counting Backwards*. How does the way in which Taylor views herself at the beginning of the novel compare or contrast with the way she views herself at the end? How do her views about Sunny Meadows change throughout the course of the novel? How do they stay the same?
6. What is something she learned or realized at the end that she didn't know or understand at the beginning? What do you think brought about this understanding? Could she have learned this without being admitted to Sunny Meadows?
7. Growth is a theme in *Counting Backwards*. Give three examples of growth from the novel:

- I. In Taylor, as a person.
- II. In her relationships.
- III. In others because of her influence.

8. How does AJ's character change over the course of the novel? How do his actions advance the plot? How might Taylor's growth have been different if he had not been there?

9. What is the role of Dr. Deb in Taylor's growth as a character? How does Dr. Deb's character develop the theme of perception? Describe someone in your life who has stimulated your growth in ways that were difficult, but valuable.

Craft and Structure

1. The guards at Sunny Meadows are known to the residents as "safeties." How is this ironic? In what ways does the author use similar labels to evoke the mood of Sunny Meadows? Is it effective?

2. In Chapter 15, Taylor uses the terms "fake me" and "real me" to describe herself. What does this mean? What do you think is Taylor's motivation for acting the opposite of how she feels? Is this normal? Describe an example, in your life, in literature, or in popular culture in which a person acts one way in one situation and another way in a different situation. Why do you think people do this?

3. In many of Taylor's sessions with Dr. Deb, she reflects on her childhood and the painful memories associated with it. How does this backstory affect the plot and tension of the story? What do you think these sessions reveal about Taylor's character? Are there other examples that support these character traits?

4. Taylor first meets AJ in the basement of Sunny Meadows. How does the setting of the darkroom affect their ability to communicate? How does it add tension and suspense to the story?

5. Taylor cites her grandmother throughout the novel as a source of comfort and safety. In what ways does Taylor strive to recreate these feelings in Sunny Meadows? Who in your life influences your behavior, even when you are not with them? What experiences with that person (or people) has shaped you?

Extensions

1. "This isn't the end," is something AJ says to Taylor at the conclusion of the novel. "I'll see you again on the outside," is something Margo writes in a letter to Taylor. Write a scene where Taylor is reunited with AJ and/or Margo outside of Sunny Meadows. What challenges might they face without the structured safety of being "on the inside?"

2. Draw a map of Sunny Meadows, illustrate a scene from the novel, or diagram another possible escape plan she might have designed.

3. Imagine each of the main characters as a trading card. List for each individual: strength, weakness, dream, fear, superpower.

4. If you could change one thing about the novel *Counting Backwards*, what would it be, and why?

5. How do you think Taylor will be different as a parent if she has children later in life?

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