

A Curriculum Guide to

***Spy School Secret Service***

By Stuart Gibbs

**About the Book**

Ben goes undercover in the White House to take on a SPYDER operative determined to assassinate the president in this latest addition to the *New York Times* bestselling *Spy School* series.

Thirteen-year-old Ben Ripley has had a lot of field success despite only just beginning his second year at *Spy School*, something even graduates rarely experience. But he'd never have survived without the help from experienced agents and his friends. Now he's been called in on a solo mission—and the fate of the United States of America is on his shoulders. The mission: prevent a presidential assassination by infiltrating the White House and locating the enemy operative. But when the president's son is as helpful as a hamster, and Ben realizes a trained SPYDER agent would never *appear* to be up to something (they're far too clever for that), it turns out he may be in over his head this time.

When everything goes wrong, Ben must rely on his *Spy School* friends to save his reputation...but even friends can double-cross or be swayed to the enemy's side.

***Spy School Secret Service through Writing and Research***

The following questions may be utilized throughout the study of *Spy School Secret Service* as reflective writing prompts, or alternatively, they can be used as targeted questions for class discussion and reflection. The questions contained in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (R.L.4.1, 2, 3, 7, 9) (R.L. 5.1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9) (R.L.6.1, 2, 3) (S.L.6.1, 2, 3) (W4-6.4)

1. The novel begins with Zoe Zibbell declaring, “SPYDER is back!” In what way does this news impact Ben and the rest of his friends and classmates at the CIA Academy of Espionage? Why are they all so interested in what Zoe has to divulge about SPYDER?
2. This installment of *Spy School* also opens with a brief, outlining information about Ben's next mission. Using this initial document, what can you predict about the adventure Ben will soon embark upon?
3. Until recently, SPYDER'S existence had been extremely classified, only known to a few highly ranked people at the CIA. Now that more people are aware of this evil organization, how does this make defeating the group potentially more complicated?
4. When Ben is given a dossier from the CIA stamped FOR YOUR EYES ONLY: OPERATION PUNGENT MUSKRAT, Ben is told by the president of the United States: “I know, it's a lousy name. But I assure you it's an extremely important mission.” How do you think Ben's newest mission compares to the others he's been assigned to by the CIA? Do you think being given this

assignment by the nation's president makes this mission that much more challenging? In what ways does the president's family make it that much more difficult for Ben to be close to the target?

5. Think about the nicknames Zoe has given some of her classmates at spy school. Which of them is your favorite? Do you find them all to be appropriate and fitting monikers for these spies-in-training and their teachers?

6. The president tells Ben, "Motorcades draw a lot of attention. If I want to be incognito, I travel this way." Does Ben's reaction to learning the president goes out without the Secret Service seem appropriate? Why or why not?

7. Though it's common knowledge that the "Idiot" (the school principal) is one of the least intelligent people in the entire intelligence community, Ben states that "the principal wasn't an easy target" for information. How is this so? Given this knowledge, why does the CIA continue to keep someone like him in a position of this capacity? In what ways does getting information from him prove to be challenging?

8. How is Mike's arrival as a student at the Academy of Espionage received by Ben's other friends? Are there any ways in which his relationship with Ben has changed now that they're both students at the spy school? In what ways is Mike's presence and way of thinking helpful to Ben?

9. What are the most impressive obstacles Ben and his friends overcome while participating in an obstacle course? Which of these hurdles did you like best? Why?

10. Ben tells Jason, "You know why I'm here, right? It's for your father's safety. We think his life is in danger." Does Jason's response to this news surprise you? If so, in what way? What do you learn about Jason from his reaction? Ben continues by telling Jason, "I could give a hoot about a stuck-up brat like you, but I'd really like to prevent these guys from killing your father." Do you think his reaction to Jason is appropriate? Why or why not?

11. Consider the unusual cast of secondary characters: Whom did you like the most? The least? For what reason? Of all of the characters, who did you feel was most similar to you due to his or her personality or experiences?

12. When considering the seriousness of this current mission and her lack of involvement after receiving orders from Cyrus, Erica tells Ben, "Cyrus believes this mission is far more dangerous than he told you. He's pretty sure you can handle it, but if you can't... Well, you're... You're expendable." How does understanding the potential danger he's in impact Ben's attitude about the task at hand?

13. After his second time getting the guard dogs' attention at the White House and still being allowed access to the building, Ben thinks, "My security had been lax... SPYDER never did what anyone expected. SPYDER was always steps ahead of us." How does this epiphany and his

better understanding of how SPYDER operates help Ben begin to realize the goal of this criminal organization?

14. Similar to the other books in the Spy School series, *Spy School Secret Service* is told in first person. How would the story be different if another character besides Ben was telling it? Do you think changing the point of view would make the story better or worse? Why?

15. Erica tells everyone that before being recruited to spy school, Chip was a student at an arts academy where he specialized in acting, singing, tap dance, and playing the oboe. When Chip appears astonished that she knows this secret about his former life, she tells him, "I'm studying to be a spy. It's my job to know things." In your opinion, why is Erica such an excellent spy? What do you see her weaknesses to be?

16. How has Warren changed throughout the course of the series? Why does Ben state that "Warren's not that good of a student"? Do you think that's a fair assessment? In what ways have his camouflaging skills improved? Do you feel that his overall reception from his classmates inspires him to align himself with SPYDER? If so, how?

17. Were you surprised to learn that Erica's mother, Catherine, is a British MI6 agent? In what ways do you believe this has shaped Erica into becoming the young woman she is? Does this knowledge seem to surprise Ben?

18. After Erica tells Ben she believes in him, she blames the sedative she was given, claiming, "it's dampening my usual tendency to play down my emotions, making me far more honest than I normally feel comfortable with. It's really annoying." Why is Erica typically so guarded with her feelings? In what ways do her classmates use this opportunity to learn how she really thinks and feels about them all?

19. Using the phrase, "This book is about. . ." supply five words to describe *Spy School Secret Service*.

20. Why is it so important that Ben figure out SPYDER isn't trying to assassinate the president, but rather is targeting the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff? How does this help the team focus on the task at hand?

21. What was your impression of Jason Stern? In what ways is his family unusual? Considering how he treats Ben, do you think he still deserves any sympathy? Does the incident of his wet pants at the conclusion of the novel seem like a fitting punishment for his behavior toward Ben? Do you think Erica is justified in seeking this revenge? What can be inferred by her choice to retaliate against Jason, given his nasty behavior?

22. Considering past missions, including those in *Spy School Secret Service*, how has Ben and Erica's relationship changed over their time together in school and in the field? Considering her confession of her feelings and why she's not ready for a relationship between them, what do you predict will be the biggest hurdle they will have to face in the future?

23. As *Spy School Secret Service* closes, Ben has solved and completed an important mission for the CIA. Predict what adventures await him in the next installment/adventure of *Spy School*.

### **Extension Activities**

The following activities contained in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (R.L.4.1, 2, 3) (R.L.5.1, 2, 4) (R.L.6.1, 2) (W4-6.4)

1. In *Spy School Secret Service*, the White House and the Pentagon are important destinations for the events that transpire in the book. Both of these buildings are important in their own right; ask students to select either the White House or the Pentagon and investigate the following:

- When was it founded and by whom?
- What is the building's primary function?
- Who operates it?
- How many visitors does it get annually?
- How many people work there, and what kind of work do they do?
- What are some of the most unusual or interesting facts you've learned about the facility?

2. After being captured breaking back into the CIA Academy of Espionage, Ben and his friends are forced to stand trial at a military tribunal. Using the library resources and the Internet, have students research military tribunals to learn the following:

- What is a tribunal?
- What is the main purpose of holding them?
- Where are they usually held?
- Who oversees a tribunal?
- What is the history of tribunals in the US?
- What are some of the most unusual or interesting facts you've learned about tribunals?

After completing their research, have students share their knowledge with their peers.

3. Throughout the *Spy School* series, readers learn about the CIA and their work in investigating crime syndicates in the United States and throughout the world. The CIA is one of the world's largest police organizations. Using the following link, <https://www.cia.gov/index.html>, have students research the role of the CIA in investigating crime and create a digital report about their findings. Have them consider the following:

- What is the primary function of the CIA in the United States?
- What types of investigative campaigns does this organization undertake?
- Using the CIA resources available online, what are some of the specific divisions of the organization?
- What is the criteria for working as a CIA agent?

After completing their research, have students share their knowledge with their peers.

4. A number of the characters in *Spy School Secret Service* are not what they appear to be. Consider the importance of appearances and the need for disguising one's self. What might be a

rationale to do so? What are the ramifications and consequences of such a choice? Select one character from the novel and write a short analysis of his or her choice to use a disguise.

5. In the *Spy School* series, readers witness all the characters mature and grow throughout the course of the novels. Based on your observations, which character do you believe demonstrates the greatest growth? Compose a short persuasive essay offering your position on this issue. While considering your selected character's experiences, use textual evidence to provide specific examples to support your case.

6. *Spy School Secret Service* highlights the challenges of being a kid who is also a CIA agent. Using the novel as inspiration, use textual descriptions of this experience for these characters. Place students in pairs and have them role-play as news reporters interviewing one of the other operatives. To enrich the activity, record the report and allow students to use props and costumes for their news report.

7. Readers see the events in *Spy School Secret Service* through Ben's point of view. Assume the role of one of the secondary characters from the *Spy School* books and draft a diary entry detailing what you've experienced and witnessed. To prepare, create an outline using the five W's (who, what, when, where, and why). Remember to write in first person and give special attention to sensory imagery (what you saw, smelled, heard, etc.)

8. In small groups, have students select a favorite scene from *Spy School Secret Service* and create either a digitally or manually illustrated graphic novel for that scene. Using a digital comic strip creator (<http://www.makebeliefscomix.com/Comix/> or <http://infinitecomic.com/> for example), have students begin by using the strips to create storyboards for their scene. Have students select original art, images, and graphics. Alternatively, students could assume the roles of two of the characters using each one's personality and voice; they could then interact with one another by creating an extension of a scene from one of the novels. As part of the evaluation component, consider panel size and number of panels, transitions and layouts, artwork, writing, and lettering.

9. Ask students to describe one of the problems faced by a character in *Spy School Secret Service* and write advice to him or her. Students may choose to be serious or humorous. Use the letter format common to newspaper advice columns, where the person with the problem writes for advice and the advisor writes back. Often the person seeking advice disguises his or her name with a descriptive name associated with the problem.

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