

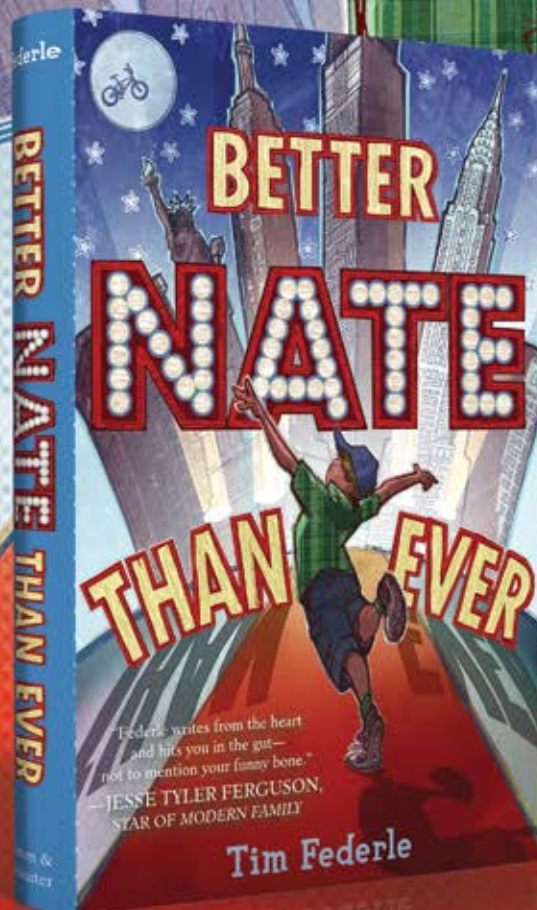
A Common Core Curriculum Guide for

# Better Nate Than Ever

and

# Five, Six, Seven, Nate!

by Tim Federle



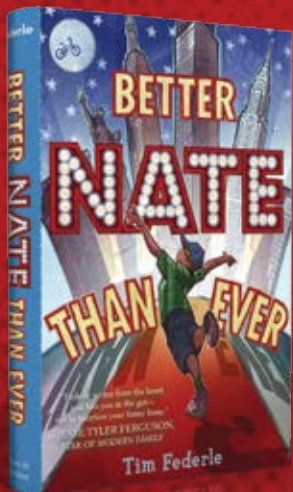
## About the Book

Thirteen-year-old Nate Foster doesn't fit in at his Jankburg, Pennsylvania middle school. Instead of being athletic and community-minded like his town-favorite big brother, Anthony, short, chubby Nate is a belting boy soprano who dreams of starring in a Broadway show. With the help of his best friend, Libby, he embarks on a definitely-not-parent-approved journey to New York City to audition for a musical version of the famous movie, *E.T.* Nate soon learns that getting to the audition is only the beginning of an adventure on which he discovers the true meaning of family, friendship, acceptance, and, most important, how to be his own best self.

## Discussion Questions

The questions in this section particularly address the following Common Core State Standards, among others: (RL.4.1) (RL.4-8.2, 3, 6) (RL.5-6.5) (SL.4-8.1a-d)

1. As the novel begins, readers meet Nate and Libby in the Fosters' backyard. After reading this first chapter, list at least three worries Nate has about his upcoming adventure to New York. Also, list at least three concerns Nate has about how life is going in Jankburg.
2. Nate and Libby use a kind of shorthand in their conversations by referring to Broadway shows and song lyrics. Can you think of any shared experiences that you and your friends or family use to communicate in a special way? Explain your answer.
3. Throughout his stay in New York City, Nate finds himself delighted by the diversity and open-mindedness of its citizens. Give at least four specific examples of this delight that makes Nate love the city more and more. List at least two moments in the novel where Nate realizes New York is not entirely a paradise.
4. In Jankburg, Nate endures a lot of taunting, including being called "Natey the Lady." What is Nate's attitude toward this treatment? Do you think he handles the situation well? Why or why not?
5. Nate makes observations about clothing and colors throughout the novel, from the "grey" of Greyhound Bus stations to the festive coat he "borrows" later on. How do Nate's comments on color and style affect your understanding of his character? How would you describe yourself in terms of your favorite (and least favorite) colors, your fashion choices, and the way you use these lenses to make sense of your world?
6. Who is Jordan Rylance? Would you call him Nate's enemy? Why or why not? What important things about Nate do you learn from his scenes discussing Jordan?
7. The type of large-group audition Nate attends is sometimes called a "cattle call." The preliminary audition rounds of shows like *American Idol*, as well as the setting of the Broadway classic (and movie) *A Chorus Line* are cattle call auditions. Compare and contrast the way Nate is treated (and the way he feels about it) at the New York cattle call versus the way he is treated in Jankburg.
8. Who is Aunt Heidi? What does Nate almost instantly like about her? In what ways is Nate worried or confused by Heidi's words and behavior? Why isn't Aunt Heidi very positive about Nate's ambition?
9. Nate causes a lot of trouble by going "missing" from home in Pennsylvania. How does Libby help to cover for him?
10. What happens when Nate's mom arrives in New York? How do she and Aunt Heidi resolve their differences? Explain your answer.



**Better Nate Than Ever**

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11. Who is James Madison? What does he represent in the story? How does Libby describe to Nate the comeuppance James receives near the novel's end? Why might this be important to Nate? How does he show compassion for James even from New York?
12. Deep down, what do you think is Nate's greatest dream? Do you see any similarities between Nate's aspirations and your own? Explain your answer.
13. Is it important that Nate is still in New York at the end of the story? What do you hope will happen next? Do you think Nate will be okay even if his dream doesn't come true? Why or why not?

## Activities & Research

### STORYTELLING

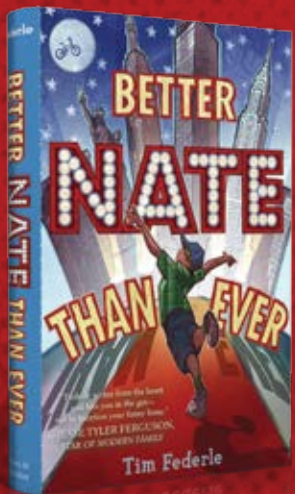
The questions and activities in this section particularly address the following Common Core State Standards, among others: (W.4-8.3a-c) (W.4-5.1a) (W.6-8.4) (SL.4-8.1a-b-c) (RST.6-8.7)

1. Nate's first-person narration begins with the line, "I'd rather not start with backstory." What is backstory? What key backstory details does Nate reveal in the first chapter? Why do you think he was right to share this backstory even though he doesn't really want to? Imagine that this first chapter is being narrated by Anthony, Libby, or Nate's mom. Still using first person, rewrite the chapter, giving the backstory from this character's point-of-view.
2. *Better Nate Than Ever* can be read as the story of a boy taking big risks to pursue his dream. With friends or classmates, brainstorm a list of big dreams kids might hope to achieve. Vote to select the two most intriguing dreams. With the class divided into two groups, outline ways to reach for each dream and the obstacles that a kid might encounter. Share your outlines with the larger group. Discuss how this exercise has (or hasn't) inspired students to continue working on a "dream story."
3. Create a survey, inviting friends or classmates to share the place they would most like to visit. Compile the information into a graph or chart. Are there any popular destinations? What other conclusions might you draw from the survey results?
4. The novel ends when Nate receives a phone call. What do you want to have happen next? Write the opening chapter of a sequel to *Better Nate Than Ever*.

### MOVIES & LIVES

The questions and activities in this section particularly address the following Common Core State Standards, among others: (RL.4-8.7) (W.4-8.3a-c) (W.4-6.1, 6) (W.7-8.2, 6) (W.4-8.2a-b, 7) (RI.4-5.4, 5) (RI. 6-8.1, 4) (SL.4-8.4)

1. Watch the 1982 Steven Spielberg modern classic, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. Write a review of the movie, including your thoughts on its plot and, if desired, comparing it to some of your favorite science fiction movies.
2. Go to the library or online to learn more about the making of *E.T.* and the ways in which it reflects director Steven Spielberg's own childhood experiences. Create an oral report or informative poster about the development, making, and legacy of the movie.
3. After reading *Better Nate Than Ever*, write a short essay describing the connections you see between the movie *E.T.* and this novel. Include comparisons between Nate and Elliott, as well as between Nate and E.T.



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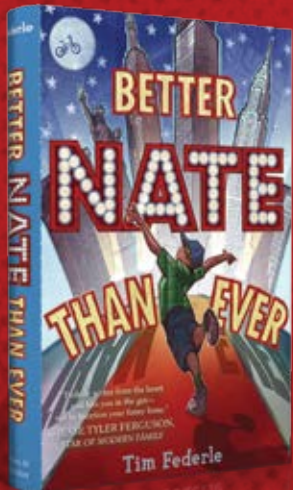
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4. What movie would you like to see made into a Broadway musical and why? Create a PowerPoint presentation with slides describing the movie's plot, three to four ideas for songs based on key scenes, and favorite actors and actresses you'd like to see in the lead roles. Present your PowerPoint to friends or classmates.

### **BROADWAY BABY**

**The questions and activities in this section particularly address the following Common Core State Standards, among others: (W.4–8.2a-b, 7) (RI.4.4, 5) (RI.5.4, 5) (RI.6–8.1, 4) (SL.4–8.5, 6) (SL.4–7.1) (SL. 8.2)**

1. The novel is laced with references to theatrical hits and flops. Make a list of the shows mentioned in the story and learn more about them online. Using your research, make an informational booklet entitled "A Guide to the Shows of *Better Nate Than Ever*."
2. When Nate thinks of New York City, he dreams of Broadway. If you could spend twenty four hours in Manhattan (the most famous part of New York City—home to Broadway, Wall Street, Central Park, and the Empire State Building, among other landmarks), what would you do? Create a mini travel guide to your one-day tour of New York. Research online important landmarks and tourist attractions in New York City to help you create your guide.
3. What's there to see on- and off-Broadway today? Use Google, or another search engine of your choice, to find three musicals, plays, or special events that you would like to attend. Complete an index card for each event, noting its title, location, brief description, and who might like to attend. Then, take on the role of a travel agent and share the information with friends or classmates.
4. In the chapter titled, "Learning Lines," Nate plays the parts of ALL of the characters in the scene he is given. Piece together the play scene from the chapter, and with friends or classmates, act the scene aloud, each person playing just one role.
5. Design a poster for the *E.T.—the Broadway Musical*. If desired, invite friends and classmates to do the same and create a classroom or hallway display of your poster designs.



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# About *Five, Six, Seven, Nate!*

Thirteen-year-old Nate Foster—the awkward, flamboyant, misfit star of *Better Nate Than Ever*—has made it to Broadway! Finally, he’s in a place where he can be himself and be understood. Or is he? The team putting together a Broadway show includes a confused former video game designer as the director and a cast full of divas and divos with stage parents at their backs. This turns out to be as challenging an environment as the suburban Pennsylvania middle school he’s just escaped. Despite the excitement of rehearsing a brand-new musical, Nate discovers that he must look inside to find the truth about his talents, his contribution to the show, and what it means to have—and to be—a true friend.

## Before Reading the Book:

### Writing & Discussion Activities

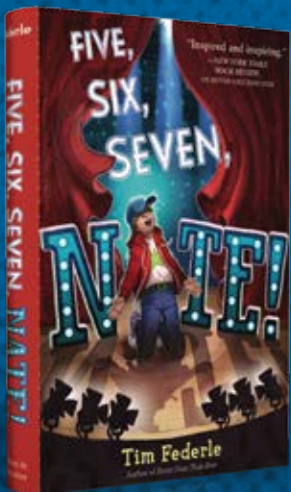
The writing and discussion activities below correlate to the following Common Core State Standards: (W.4-8.3) (SL.4-8.1, 3)

1. Ask students to write about a personal ambition or goal. Have them describe the goal. What might they do to try to achieve it? How do they imagine their lives would change if they achieved their ambition tomorrow?
2. *Five, Six, Seven, Nate!* gives readers a behind-the-scenes look at the making of a Broadway musical. Invite students to share theatrical experiences they have had as audience members or performers (as actors, dancers, singers, or musicians). What special insights about theater or performance might they wish to share with the class? If their experience with theater is limited, what might they be most interested in discovering when reading a book about a kid about to perform on Broadway?

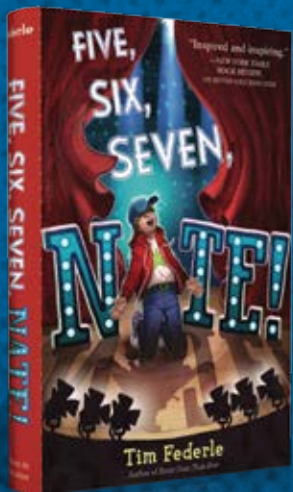
## Discussion Questions

The discussion questions below correlate to the following Common Core State Standards: (SL.4-8.1, 3, 4) (SL.6-8.2, 3) (RL.4-8.1, 2, 3) (RH.4-8.6)

1. The first chapter of *Five, Six, Seven, Nate!* depicts Nate and his best friend, Libby, saying good-bye. What differences do you see between Nate’s attitude toward their upcoming separation, and Libby’s? What do you think are the reasons for these differences?
2. The novel is narrated in first person by Nate. How do you think this affects what readers learn about Broadway? Is Nate a reliable or an unreliable narrator? Explain your answer.
3. Early in the novel, readers meet Jordan Rylance, the boy who will play the lead in the show. What type of descriptive language does the author use to introduce Jordan? What is your first impression of him?
4. What role is Nate given in the show? Is his Broadway dream developing in the way he expected? What are some ways Nate is thrilled with rehearsal life? What are some ways that the chapter titled “And You Thought P.E. Was Bad” sums up his experience?
5. Look back through the novel to find chapters in which Libby and Nate communicate via phone and the Internet. How does their relationship shift in the course of these exchanges? Do you think their friendship is being diminished or enhanced by being apart? Are both Nate and Libby holding back some truths as their relationship goes online and, if so, what secrets are they guarding? Explain your answers.



6. After discovering that *E.T.: The Musical* shows signs of being a flop, Nate “look[s] around, desperate to see if any of the other kids overheard this critical gossip. But they’re busy not listening. They’re texting, joking, being regular kids. I wonder what that’s like.” What does this passage tell you about Nate and about his sense of what the lives of his castmates are like?
7. From cast to crew to producers, Nate meets all kinds of characters on Broadway. If the novel were being made into a television movie, which character (Nate, Jordan, Genna, Dewey, Kianna, Asella, Mackey, or someone else) do you think you could best portray and why?
8. In the scarf-and-box dance number he improvises with Garret Charles and Monica, and in his secret rehearsals with Asella, what talents does Nate reveal? List some other moments in the story where Nate unwittingly or spontaneously makes a special contribution to the show.
9. In the Chapter “William O’Keefe,” Nate and Libby have a complicated conversation about Libby’s new relationship with Billy and her plan to start a Gay-Straight Alliance at their school in Jankburg. What sentences do Nate and/or Libby seem to leave uncompleted—what thoughts unspoken? Why do you think each of these normally flamboyant characters withdraws slightly in this scene?
10. Nate philosophizes, “When you’ve had a whole life of getting picked last, you end up playing into it . . . when you realize you’ll never be first, the best thing you can do is set yourself up to be last. That way you’re at least something.” Do you agree or disagree with Nate’s position? Why or why not?
11. What complicated chain of events results in Nate being the one to play E.T. for the television promo spot? How do these events show ways in which Nate has begun to grow up and gain trust, and from whom?
12. Compare Jordan’s relationship with his mother to Nate’s relationships with his parents. How do you think Nate would answer the question, “Can there be a worse mother than a stage mother?” Explain your answer.
13. Libby’s Facebook posting of Nate in his E.T. costume but not his mask would have caused a bigger stir if another, larger crisis had not occurred. What was this crisis and how does it change Nate’s role in E.T.?
14. The chapter “Twitter Is Ablaze” describes the aftermath of the first preview. What do you learn about the show, the cast, and Nate in this chapter?
15. Who is Nate’s secret admirer? While most of the book’s chapter names are followed by subtitles counting down the days and hours until E.T. opens on Broadway, the chapters after the admirer is revealed are not. In what other important ways are these final chapters different?
16. Has reading *Five, Six, Seven, Nate!* helped you gain insight into the meanings of the words “family” and “friendship”? Do you think this could be viewed as the most important theme of the novel? Explain your answers.
17. What hopes and dreams do you have for Nate at the end of the novel? What elements of the way Nate has navigated Broadway might be a good model for any kid, pursuing any kind of dream?

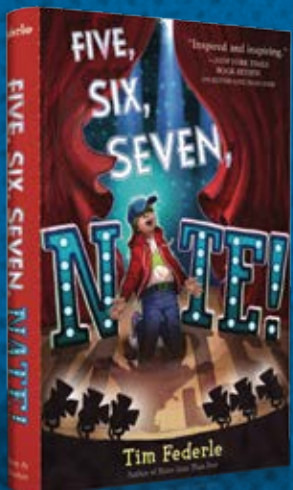


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## Research and Writing Activities

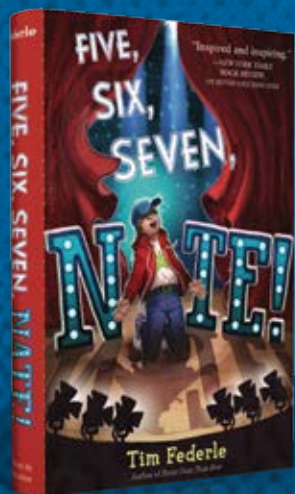
The research and writing activities below correlate to the following **Common Core State Standards: (L.4-8.4) (RL.5-8.4) (RL.5-6.5) (RL.6-8.6) (RL.4-8.7) (SL.4-8.1, 3) (W.4-8.2, 7) (WHST.6-8.6)**

1. The first chapter of the novel is entitled, "The Fun'll Come Out, Tomorrow," a twist on a well-known song from the Broadway musical *Annie*. Go to the library or online to learn the history and plot of this show, and the lyrics to the song "The Sun'll Come Out, Tomorrow." Write a short essay listing at least two reasons you think the author may have chosen this first chapter title, and at least two ways this play-on-words can be interpreted in terms of the novel's plot and themes.
2. Create a Reader's Companion for *Five, Six, Seven, Nate!* Include definitions of the terms casting, rehearsal, stage manager, choreographer, director, preview, curtain call; the names and short descriptions of at least six plays to which Nate refers in the novel; a page of information about Broadway; and any other information you feel might be helpful to future readers. (Hint: The American Theater Wing **AmericanTheatreWing.org**; Internet Broadway Database **IBDB.com**; and the Broadway League **Broadway.org** are good resources to begin your research.)
3. Using information from the novel, create a Broadway program for *Five, Six, Seven, Nate!* Include the names of the director, choreographer, stage manager, producer, the actors playing Elliott, Gertie, Alien 7, Alien 8, understudies, and so on. Use publishing or design software of your choice to create the text.
4. Nate and Libby refer to musicals and Broadway trivia as a kind of personal shorthand in their conversation. With friends or classmates, discuss whether you have topics, such as a sport, hobby or talent, to which you refer. How do these references help you understand yourself or communicate with others who share your interests? Individually, make an annotated list of at least ten movies, bands or songs, baseball phrases, computer-programming terms, or other specialized language that you use frequently. If desired, present and explain your list to friends or classmates.
5. Throughout the novel, reference is made to ways in which *E.T.: The Musical* differs from the 1982 Steven Spielberg movie, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. Think of an experience you have had reading a book and then seeing a movie it inspired, such as *Eragon* or *The Spiderwick Chronicles*. Create a chart comparing primary characters, important events, and beginning and ending scenes in the book and movie.
6. Nate often feels lonely and misunderstood in the course of the story, but it may be *E.T.*'s star Jordan Rylance who feels the most like an outsider. In the character of Jordan, write at least four journal entries, including one as he prepares for his first day of rehearsal, one reflecting on the day he goes to the mask fitting, one recounting the events of the live television appearance fiasco, and one that he writes after his last appearance in the novel.
7. *Five, Six, Seven, Nate!* looks at the feeling of being a misfit in terms of social situations, talents and experience, sexual orientation, and even financial status.
  - a. With friends or classmates, discuss what type of "misfit" status do you think would be most challenging for someone your age? Is there a difference between feeling like a misfit on the inside, and being perceived as a misfit by those around you? Have you ever felt like a misfit? Do you think everyone feels like a misfit in some aspect of their lives? Why or why not? Are there some benefits to feeling like a misfit?
  - b. Individually or in small groups, summarize the results of your discussion from activity 7a in a PowerPoint or other multimedia presentation entitled "THE NEGATIVES (AND POSITIVES) OF FEELING LIKE A MISFIT."
  - c. Make a brainstorm list of books you have read featuring characters who feel like they don't belong and/or read another such book (suggestions: *The Misfits* by James Howe or *Dancing Home* by Alma Flor Ada and Gabriel M. Zubizarreta).



- d. Create an annotated reading list of misfits featuring titles from activity 7c, book covers or other character images, short plot summaries, and, for each entry, a paragraph sharing an insight or personal connection you make with the story.

Guide written in 2013 by Stasia Ward Kehoe. Stasia holds a BA in English from Georgetown University and an MA in Performance Studies from New York University/Tisch School of the Arts. She has taught dance and writing classes to elementary through high school students on both the East and West Coasts. Her novels are published by Viking/Penguin. She lives in western Washington.



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