

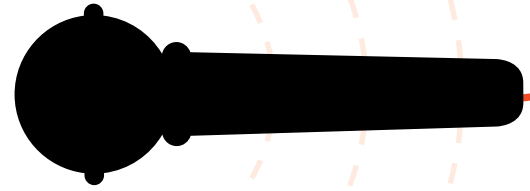
2020–2021 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature

# JASON REYNOLDS

**GRAB THE MIC**  
TELL YOUR STORY

Educator Guide for  
Middle School





# A **NOTE** TO EDUCATORS

Today is a time of great disruption and, hopefully, change. People around the world are finding their voices and using them to speak up for what they believe in or to discuss their experiences. Children and teens are among them, reckoning with events unfolding that greatly affect them, and adjusting to new schedules and realities. Kids are eager to discuss and share ideas, to ask questions and learn from new sets of circumstances. Ready them by helping them feel comfortable sharing their stories and to see value in those of their peers will activate empathy and strength that will stay with them as they move forward. Opportunities for social and emotional learning, especially tied to such a personal project, provide tools that not only shape academic life, but also equip students to build meaningful relationships and identify important ideas, behaviors, and goals. Activities like these build comradery and openness with classmates, and even help kids to better understand themselves. We hope you'll use this guide to help your students feel empowered to tell their stories, and motivate them to think about giving an audience to all kinds of voices. When they feel supported and connected, they can replicate that atmosphere for others. They can see that when they tell their stories, they are inviting others to do the same; to be heard, to be understood, to be valued.

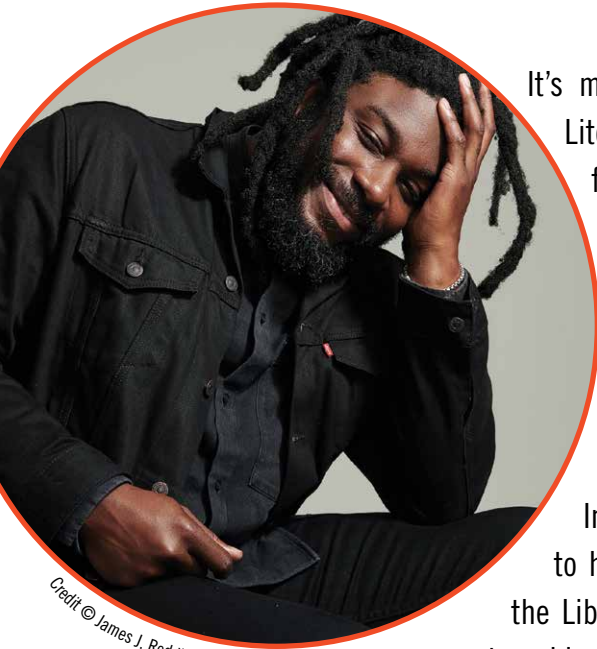
# HOW TO USE THIS **GUIDE** WITH YOUR **STUDENTS**

You may be leading a virtual classroom for the time being and may be looking for ways to adapt these activities for your needs. Jason’s [“Write. Right. Rite.” video series](#) is perfect for distance learning; activities “Unpacking Symbolism,” “First and Last Line,” and “Mirrors and Windows” in this guide also involve independent work that can work particularly well virtually, with students gathering again as a group for an opportunity to share responses. “A Different Point of View” offers an alternative option for virtual learning. Look for the red stars throughout the guide for additional suggestions for remote learning adaptations. ★

Please note that the activities in this guide can be used independently and in any order. Each activity begins with an “Instructions” section that gives background information and instructions to use to prepare students for the activity that follows. You may choose to assign students or a group of students to prepare the group for the activity as outlined in these “Instructions” sections, allowing them to take more active roles in building and strengthening elements of storytelling. You might consider incorporating the guide into an author study of Jason Reynolds and his books or doing these activities with smaller groups and book clubs. Once students have spent time engaging and preparing to tell their own stories, you can visit [StoryCorpsConnect.org](http://StoryCorpsConnect.org) and [view the StoryCorps Connect toolkit](#) to help them record their own interviews; please see more details in the StoryCorps section of this guide.

If you are in the classroom and eager to use these activities as part of an authorless event, please share the below steps with your students! The sections and activities that follow speak directly to your students as well, and can be shared accordingly.

# A NOTE FROM **JASON REYNOLDS:** 2020 NATIONAL AMBASSADOR FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S LITERATURE



Credit © James J. Reddington

It's me, Jason Reynolds, your National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, which is a fancy way of saying the leader of the Literature for Young People Parade. I'm the dude with the whistle and fancy hat, marching and hyping up the crowd. Or better yet, an even easier way to think of me is as a cheerleader. Books are my pom-poms. High kicks and all. Or, for some of you, I'm the instigator in your crew, all in your ear like, "Yo, I know you not just gon' let this book look at you like that, and not read nothing." Yeah, that's me.

In all seriousness, I'm just a big fan of books, and now it's my job to help every young person become a big fan of books too. That's why the Librarian of Congress Dr. Carla Hayden appointed me and why I'm in partnership with the Children's Book Council, Every Child a Reader, the Library of Congress, and Simon & Schuster with this new initiative, [GRAB THE MIC: TELL YOUR STORY](#).

I think of who I was as a young person, believing the stories in my curriculum were the only ones that mattered. Believing that because the characters didn't line up with me, but found themselves between the pages of a book that my story—my character—was unwanted and unnecessary.

Some of you are thinking, "But isn't it your job to say, 'Hey kids, get out there and READ?' Isn't that why they gave you that shiny medal?" Well...I suppose. But when I was a kid, I never did something just because I was told to. I did it because I believed the person telling me could actually see me as me, and hear me as human. That's what GRAB THE MIC aims to do, and the residual effects of this, I believe, will be more readers.

# GRAB THE MIC: TELL YOUR STORY

With the activities below and the challenges included in his [“Write. Right. Rite.” video series](#), Jason invites you to join him on a reading journey like nothing you may have seen before. That’s because it’s your turn to tell your own story, and, in doing so, you may even discover the types of stories you like to read.

Now, how do you go about doing that? Finding your voice and learning to value your experiences are great goals in theory, but what does that look like? How can you challenge yourself to share what’s important and meaningful to you? Maybe you haven’t thought much about it, or maybe you think about it all the time. Maybe you’re confused about what books and stories want from you, and what you want from them. Wherever you are, that’s okay—better than okay, really, because you’ve got a fantastic Ambassador for Young People’s Literature on your side, who wants to give you the opportunity to become your own ambassador.

So gather your classmates, rally your teacher, and let everyone know that you’re ready to GRAB THE MIC, and that you hope they’re excited to do the same.



# SETTING UP AN **AUTHORLESS** EVENT

- 1.** With your teacher and classmates, choose a date and time for your GRAB THE MIC event. Will you invite kids from other grades or classes? Does your school have an e-newsletter? Consider including a banner with event details on your school's website or social media page. The details are up to you!
- 2.** Decide on the format for your event. Do you need a moderator or a host? Will you begin by interviewing one another the way Jason often asks questions to kids who attend his events? How else might you go about listening to others and supporting them in telling their own stories? How will you move between activities or conversations?
- 3.** Set up your space or pick your platform. How many people will attend? Think about printing copies of this guide to share with attendees or how you will distribute the link. Depending on your circumstances, you may be arranging an in-person or virtual gathering. Please adapt as needed using our red star suggestions for virtual learning throughout this guide.
- 4.** It's story time! GRAB THE MIC and follow the activities below as you host the event you and your classmates have put together. Let us know what you plan and how it went at #TellYourStoryWithJason.
- 5.** Come together after your event to talk about what activities got you most excited, and what you were most interested to discover about yourself or your classmates. Or reflect for yourself on how it felt to GRAB THE MIC, and what stories you might read or write next.

# BEING YOUR OWN AMBASSADOR

## Instructions

Create small groups for participants to have this discussion. Explain that an ambassador is a representative or a messenger. Ask students to discuss what it means to be your own ambassador. Listen to their ideas and summarize them.

## Activity

Young people can sometimes feel disconnected and disengaged in school. What if you decided to be an ambassador for yourself and others and started a new club? One that doesn't currently exist in your school.

What kind of club would you create that could bring kids together in a unique and fun way? Who is this club for, and why is it needed? What difference might this club make in the lives of your peers? Think about something you've noticed that's missing in your school and how a club like this could be beneficial.

What would be the name of this club? Think about a name that gives participants some insight into the purpose of the club and common interests of those who join.

Next, create a logo. The logo should be simple and memorable, one that will be easily recognizable to your peers and will visually communicate the unique identity of this club. Then develop a motto—a short sentence or phrase that captures the club's core values and goals.

Now that you have a draft of your ideas, how might you put this plan into action? Discuss what it will take to make this club a reality in your school.

★ Once students have gathered virtually, describe what it means to be an ambassador, and ask a student to volunteer to pose as one for the school. Have other students offer a thought or idea about situations they would like to see changed or added within their schools or communities, and give the volunteer a chance to describe how they might represent their classmates' interest in their ambassador position. Consider having multiple students switch off as ambassadors so each fields 1–2 different questions from their peers. Then have students think about what it might mean to be their own ambassador, and write a short answer to the prompt either in the chat box or in a shared Google Doc for group discussion. Go through the activity as a class, brainstorming 3–4 new clubs together before assigning roles for independent work. For each club, one student can create the logo; another can write the name, mission statement, and motto; and a third can draft the action plan.

# BEING THE CHANGE

## Instructions

This discussion invites young people, working in groups of two or three, to consider the power within themselves as well as the power in their neighborhoods and communities. Please provide the following context to launch this discussion.

## Activity

In *Look Both Ways*, we meet ten dynamic characters across ten interconnected stories that take place across ten neighborhood blocks. For these characters, so much happens along the journey between school and home. By zooming in on these characters and their lives, readers come to know characters who are more than what they may seem to be to adults in their world, and even to some of their peers. What is revealed is all that young people navigate—including fear, loss, love, courage, and loyalty—as well as the depth and perceptiveness of young people who are truth-tellers with the power to change the world.

Consider the title of this book as both a proclamation and an invitation. Think about the details of your journey to and from school that may have gone unnoticed. What are the issues and experiences in your neighborhood that feel most pressing? What are the organizations, and who are the activists in your community working for change whom you'd like to know more about? What would you like these change agents to know about you? A quotation attributed to Mahatma Gandhi says, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." What can you do to make a difference on your block or street? In your neighborhood? In your community?

★ In the days leading up to this activity, ask students to walk around their neighborhoods or communities with a more critical eye, paying attention to what they observe. Have them come prepared with a written reflection of what they've noticed. Consider opening your virtual session by reading a passage from *Look Both Ways* before asking for volunteers to read parts of their pieces. Use these to launch into a group discussion answering the questions posed in the activity. Ask students to think about how they can make a difference in their communities, and schedule a weekly or biweekly check-in where students can report back to the group about an idea or an experience they've had.



# UNPACKING SYMBOLS

## Instructions

Start by explaining that writers often include symbols in their work. A symbol can be an object, a person, an animal, the weather, or even a color that repeats and has significance.

## Activity

A symbol can represent more than just one thing. For example, in his novel *Ghost*, Jason Reynolds uses sunflowers and sunflower seeds as powerful symbols that mean more than just one thing to different characters and in different moments and contexts.

Use the following chart to identify and discuss examples of symbolism found all around you—in books, movies, and even in nature—and consider their multiple meanings.

<b>Unpacking Symbolism</b> (Remember that a symbol can have multiple meanings.)			
<b>Possible Symbol</b> (object, person, animal, weather, color, etc.)	<b>Representation</b> (I think...)	<b>Evidence</b> (Because...)	<b>Analysis</b> (I think...)
Bird	I think a bird represents freedom.	Because birds can fly wherever they'd like to go.	I think this tells me that freedom is feeling that you can make your own choices without limits.

# FIRST AND LAST LINES

## Instructions

Begin this activity by sharing the episode titled [“Write the First Line of a Story”](#) from Jason Reynolds’s Write. Right. Rite. GRAB THE MIC: Tell Your Story series. Invite participants to write a first and last line of their idea for a short story.

## Activity

Jason Reynolds says that the first line of a story is a writer’s opportunity to get the reader’s attention. Think about an idea for a short story. What will this story be about? Think about the feeling you might want to establish at the beginning of the story. Do you want your readers to laugh? To ask questions? To be surprised? Use the chart below to try writing more than one possibility for the first line using different strategies.

First Line Tries	
Device	Sentence
Dialogue	
Setting Details	
Character Description	
Action	

Then try writing a few possibilities for the last line of that same story idea. How do you want readers to feel when they finish reading your story? Do you want them to sigh? To cry? To smile?

Last Line Tries	
Device	Sentence
Dialogue	
Setting Details	
Character Description	
Action	

Now look at the possibilities you’ve written. Select the first and last lines that you like best. Maybe you’ll feel compelled to write about what happens between these lines. Maybe you’ll start your story today!

★ Share your screen to play “Write the First Line of a Story,” and then transition to the First Line Tries and Last Line Tries charts as a visual to talk students through the activity, giving a few examples of first and last lines as needed. Once they’re comfortable, have them complete the charts independently, and then invite them to share with the group if they’d like.

# AMPLIFYING YOUR VOICE

## Instructions

Explain that it may seem counterintuitive, but brevity in your writing can help amplify your voice as you share ideas and issues you care about. We see this in our daily lives on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. Social media has changed the way we express ourselves. It's more immediate and concise, yet powerful.

## Activity

What's been on your mind not only recently, but continuously? Perhaps you have opinions on how playing video games helps or hinders, a product you think everyone should know about, or whether technology makes us smarter. Or perhaps you've been thinking about a major event happening in the world, how to advance the work of equity, or issues related to the environment.

Draft a one-page opinion piece about a topic or issue you feel most passionate about. Get as many of your ideas down as you can that clearly reflect your stance on the topic you've chosen. This is not the typical opinion writing piece that you may do in school. Instead, refine and edit your writing down to just a few powerful lines.

Begin by editing your draft down to half a page. The challenge is to make sure the writing continues to reflect your stance. Then reduce your writing from half a page to a quarter of a page, making sure the writing continues to hold your point of view. Finally, edit your writing so that you end up with a 280-character tweet that powerfully expresses your thoughts about the topic you've chosen. Share your "tweet" with your peers. Whether or not you post it is up to you!

# MIRRORS AND WINDOWS

## Instructions

Explain to participants that a famous metaphor written by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop shows that sometimes books can be like mirrors, reflections of ourselves and our lives. They can positively affirm our identities. And books can be like windows, helping us to see out into the world, into the lives of others who differ from ourselves. Students can work with a partner or in a small group to talk about characters from stories they've read that have stayed with them long after the last page.

## Activity

Think about characters in books you've read. Which character is most like you? Explain how. Then think about a character who is unlike you, but has helped you to look out into the world and understand something you never realized before. Share these ideas with your partner. Who would you include when you tell your own story?

★ Ask students to come to the virtual session with a book that they feel reflects their lives, and a sentence or two to share about why they relate to it; they can hold up the copy if they have it, print off the book cover or show it from another device, or speak about it. Give students a chance to share enthusiasm or questions for other students' picks. Then introduce the mirrors and windows concept by encouraging students to reflect on their experience, both their reactions to their own books and those of their classmates. Then have them answer the questions in the activity as an independent writing exercise.

# LETTER TO **YOURSELF**

## **Instructions**

Provide participants with time to write a letter to themselves. Then invite them to share part or all of their letters with a partner.

## **Activity**

What comes to mind when you think about what it means to be brave? In *As Brave As You* by Jason Reynolds, brothers Ernie and Genie come to realize that bravery isn't just about what you will do; sometimes, it's about what you won't do.

Think about something you'd like to try or something you'd like to distance yourself from, but that you have been holding back from attempting. What's stopping you?

Write a letter to yourself. What would you say to convince yourself to be brave and go for it? Locate the parts of your letter that you feel ready to share with your partner.

# A DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEW

## Instructions

Ask participants to think of a book they've read, and then to tell someone in their group about the story's point of view. Explain that stories provide a lens through which readers come to understand not only the characters, but the world around them. Organize participants in groups of four or five, and rally them to crowdsource the titles of books told in first person that each member of their group has read.

## Activity

In Jason Reynolds's Track series, each of the four books are told from a different character's point of view. There are also multiple points of view provided in his book of interconnected stories, *Look Both Ways*. What are the benefits of providing various points of view in a story? How does the story change when authors provide only one?

Select one book that everyone in your group has read. Discuss the character whose point of view shows us the world of the story. Select a different character from that book, someone whose perspective readers know little about. Talk about the ways the story would change if told from this character's perspective. Do you think this character's point of view would make for a compelling story that you'd like to read?

Finally, discuss the importance of the author's point of view. Whose story is Jason Reynolds telling, and how do you know? How do stories change depending on which author is telling them?

★ Start the virtual session by reading short passages from the four books in Jason's Track series or stories in *Look Both Ways*, or other books featuring a variety of points of views. Discuss impressions and insights from the different readings, as well as students' perceptions and experiences with writing in different points of view. Ask them to share examples of first-person novels they've read in the chat box. Choose 1–2 of the short passages read to answer the questions posed in the activity section as a group.

# #BUILDYOURSTACK BOOK BUZZ

## Instructions

Participants should have access to numerous physical copies of books, such as in a well-stocked classroom or school library. Explain that #BuildYourStack is a movement that helps teachers build their book knowledge and libraries.

Note that this event can be altered in the following ways to address virtual events or contexts where access to books may be limited. For virtual events, students might create a digital collage of the covers of five to six books they believe their partner might enjoy, and then take turns buzzing about each book on the digital platform used for the event. For in-school events, students can write the titles of books on Post-its and create a “stack” on top of their desks or on a bulletin board and then buzz about each book.

## Activity

Work with a partner to help #BuildYourStack of books you haven’t read before and are excited to read. As you move around the library, you and your partner will identify books that one of you have read, but the other hasn’t. Take turns giving a book buzz about the ones you think your partner might enjoy without giving away the juicy parts or the ending!

Consider your partner’s interests when making suggestions, and think about titles you might group with a particular book you’ve buzzed about. Discuss how the major themes of a book are relevant to your life and perhaps to your partner’s. If a book recommendation sounds like one you’d like to read, grab it from the shelf.

The goal is to end up with a stack of five or six books that you are now dying to read! If you can, take a photo of your stack so you’ll have all the titles handy.

# EXTENSION IDEAS

## StoryCorps

Take some time to reflect on ideas that have emerged while participating in these discussions and activities. Jason Reynolds has said, “Every person walking this earth has a story. Everybody has a story that could change the outlook for life for somebody else.” How might you use your voice to tell your story?

Then think about how your story might grow. Perhaps you’d like to build a story with a writing partner or collaborate with a small group where each person contributes ideas for words, lines, characters, conflicts, and events. Or perhaps you’d like to develop a story on your own. Consider how your experiences can shape your story and how it might, as Jason says, “change the outlook” on life for others. Then go ahead and GRAB THE MIC: Tell Your Story.

At twenty-one years old, Jason worked as a StoryCorps facilitator, assisting and enabling others to tell their stories; he also recorded this clip sharing his experiences growing up and his desire to become a writer. When you’re ready, resources on StoryCorps Connect can help give you a platform to tell your story. Visit [StoryCorpsConnect.org](https://StoryCorpsConnect.org) for more information. [Listen to Jason talk](#) more about his experiences with StoryCorps, and learn how you can participate!

**NOTE TO EDUCATORS:** Download the StoryCorps Connect 2020 Teacher Toolkit [here](#).

This guide has been created by Dr. Sonja Cherry-Paul utilizing Jason Reynold’s Write.Right.Rite series as inspiration. More about her below.

DR. SONJA CHERRY-PAUL is the Director of Diversity and Equity at TCRWP (Teachers College Reading and Writing Project) as well as the cofounder and cofacilitator of the Institute for Racial Equity in Literacy. Dr. Cherry-Paul leads presentations at national conferences and provides professional development for educators on reading and writing instruction and equity and inclusion. Her most recent books are *Critical Literacy: Unlocking Contemporary Fiction* (2020) and *Breathing New Life into Book Clubs: A Practical Guide for Teachers* (2019). Follow her @SonjaCherryPaul.

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