

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

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PROMISE BOYS

NICK BROOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK



The Hate U Give meets *One of Us Is Lying* in Nick Brooks's *Promise Boys*, a trailblazing, blockbuster mystery about three teen boys of color who must investigate their principal's murder to clear their own

names—for fans of Jason Reynolds, Angie Thomas, and Karen McManus.

The Urban Promise Prep School vows to turn boys into men. As students, J.B., Ramón, and Trey are forced to follow the prestigious “program’s” strict rules. Extreme discipline, they’ve been told, is what it takes to be college bound, to avoid the fates of many men in their neighborhoods. This, the Principal Moore Method, supposedly saves lives.

But when Moore ends up murdered and the cops come sniffing around, the three boys emerge as the case’s prime suspects. With all three maintaining their innocence, they must band together to track down the real killer before they are arrested. But is the true culprit hiding among them?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Brooks is an author and award-winning filmmaker from Washington, DC. He is a 2020 graduate of USC’s TV and Film Production program. His short film, *Hoop Dreamin’*, earned him the George Lucas Scholar Award and was a finalist in the Forbes 30 Under 30 Film Fest. He is currently in development for his first feature film, *We Were Born Kings*, with Mandalay Pictures. Before becoming a filmmaker, Nick was an educator working with at-risk youth, and many of his stories are colored by his experiences with the children and families of his community. He is also the author of *Nothing Interesting Ever Happens to Ethan Fairmont*.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The Common Core Standards push readers to look closer when reading a text including examining author's craft and analyzing word choice and narrative elements. Nick Brooks's novel *Promise Boys*, includes a unique text structure, intricate characters, and complex themes that allow the reader to deeply delve into the text. This teaching guide includes discussion questions and language arts activities to be used in high school and post-secondary school as this text is read as a whole group, small group, or a combination. This guide could also be modified to be used with a student who is reading the novel independently.

The Common Core Anchor Standards in English Language Arts in reading, writing, and speaking & listening that can be addressed using the discussion questions and activities in this guide are:

English Language Arts

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1
Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2
Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3
Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4
Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5
Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9
Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10
Read and comprehend complex literary texts independently and proficiently.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.10
Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1
Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on each others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use these questions as reading check-ins, writing prompts, or classroom discussions throughout *Promise Boys*.

1. Why do you believe the author included different types of formats (texts, emails, transcripts) in the book?
2. Throughout the book, what evidence did you see that “Principal Moore created a boiling pot of toxic masculinity and male fragility?” (pg. 10)
3. A microaggression is “a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority).” ([Merriam-Webster](#)) Throughout the book, where do you notice microaggressions?
4. Mr. Reggie says, “I’m responsible” (pg. 23) for Principal Moore’s death. Do you agree? Why or why not?
5. Promise has a very high college acceptance rate, but it is shown throughout the book how they manipulate these statistics. What do they do to ensure their rate is high?
 - **Extension:** Has this happened in real life? Why would educators do that?
6. In Chapter Three of J.B.’s section (page 58), both J.B. and Principal Moore butt heads. Based on what is going on, why do they both act the way they do?
7. Uncle T is really hard on Trey, both emotionally and physically. Based on what you know about Uncle T, why does he think this is the best way to parent? Does this strategy of disciplining and managing a teen work with Trey?
8. Coach Robinson says on page 78, “Once [the system] touches you, you tainted forever, guilty or not.” Give examples of people who have touched by the system in the book. How could the situation in the book affect J.B., Trey, and Ramón in the future?
9. Looking at Chapter Four of Trey’s section (page 91-92), Trey shares that “Trey Jackson and school teachers just don’t get along, and I’m always the one to blame.” Is it fair for teachers to treat a student a certain way based on reputation or past experiences? How do the passive aggressive comments that the teachers make about Trey affect his feelings of school?

10. When Trey finds his uncle's gun in his bookbag, he is too afraid to tell his uncle, go home, or tell an adult at school. How would this situation have gone differently if Trey had a better relationship with his uncle? How would this situation have gone differently if Promise had a [safe harbor provision, similar to the one in Orange County Public Schools in Florida](#)? What are some other things that could have been different that would have changed the situation?
11. How did Ramón's experience as an emerging bilingual student affect his experience with school?
12. Ramón appreciates how his abuela is always aiming to keep him safe; however, he notices the expectation differences between himself and César (page 170). How do you think César felt when Ramón was always protected and loved openly and he wasn't?
13. The three boys end up doing investigative work themselves. Is this safe? The best decision? Why/Why not?
14. Trey was known to mess around and be aggressive with others. He meant his words as a joke, but not everyone took them that way. What does Trey realize in chapter 15 (page 191)? Do you think this will change Trey's behavior in the future? How does this interaction prove that words are powerful?
15. Why do you think the author included the point of view of "Nobody"? When did you figure out who Nobody was?
16. Why was Principal Moore looked at as "a savior of 'lost boys'" when actually, as Keyana put it, "he was drilling the joy out of them?" (pg. 252)?
17. Nick Brooks included the lines, "Would you do this for me? If me, a Black girl, was up against something like this, would you pull out all the stops to help me?" (pg. 271). Why do you believe Brooks included this question in the novel?
18. A major point within the book is that people are not the stereotypes that society has placed upon them. What are examples of stereotypes found in the book and how did characters prove that they were not those stereotypes?
19. What do you believe some of the themes are of *Promise Boys*? Are there any specific themes that you believe Brooks included for adults versus the young adult audience?



CLASSROOM EXTENSIONS

Use these activities to extend your students' thinking and experience with *Promise Boys*.

Evidence

- While reading, have students keep notes of evidence for each suspect. Whenever they read something that makes them suspicious of the character, they should add it to their notes and include the page number. In the same vein, as things are cleared up, the suspicions should be marked off and the page number of the clearing should be marked. At the end of the book, students can see if they were able to determine the guilty party and if so, when.

Why Schools Don't Educate Analysis

- Have students read the opening note by John Taylor Gatto titled "Why Schools Don't Educate." While they read, they should annotate the text with thoughts, examples, reactions, opinions, etc.
- When finished reading the opening note, students should use the text and annotations to create a one pager in response to the text. They should then move into small groups and debrief on the text.
- Have students move back to working independently and have them research for other articles that either support what John Taylor Gatto wrote or contradict it.
- They should then use their initial annotations and one pager along with the articles they find to create a response to the piece.
- **Extension:** Add a discussion around charter schools into the mix. One option is sharing the article ["The Battle Over Charter Schools"](#) with students while they do their research. Or share the article after their final response and discuss the pros and cons of charter schools.

School to Prison Pipeline

- When finished with *Promise Boys*, share the [ACLU graphic about the School-to-Prison Pipeline](#).
- Ask students how the graphic and the book connect. Allow students time to find instances in the book, mark or note them, and then have them share.
- Potential follow-up questions:
 - Ask students: In *Promise Boys*, the Congresswoman's suggestion to prevent more violence at Promise is to "develop new legislation about school resource officers, whose presence may prevent this kind of terrible event in the future" (pg. 202). Do you believe that an SRO could have prevented this crime?
 - How could increased police presence in schools increase the criminalization of students thus increasing the school to prison pipeline statistics?
- As a culminating activity, have students work in small groups to make a presentation about either a) how their school could decrease the chance of the school-to-prison pipeline; b) how schools in the United States could decrease the chance of the school-to-prison pipeline; c) how Promise should be changed to decrease the chance of the school-to-prison pipeline.
- **Extension:** [The ACLU provides discussion questions about the School-to-Prison Pipeline to further the discussion.](#)

Interrogations

- Have students read about police interrogations and share using the [jigsaw technique](#). Provide copies of all texts to all students.
- Example resources:
 - From the Innocence Project: [Five Facts About Police Deception and Youth You Should Know](#)
 - From the ACLU: [What to do When Encountering Questions from Law Enforcement?](#)
 - From Connecticut General Assembly: [Interrogation Techniques](#)
- After reading and sharing, have students use their new knowledge to analyze techniques used in *Promise Boys* by asking: Find a time in the book that connected with what we just read. Explain how it connects, your analysis of the connection, and your options in regards to both. The activity should be left open-ended to allow students to find and make connections on their own.

School Rules

- Have students create a list of the school rules that are presented in *Promise Boys* for Urban Promise Prep. When completed, have them annotate the rules: Why does each of them exist? Who gets power from the rule existing? Is the rule necessary?
 - **Extension:** Have students complete the same activity about their school.
- Have students pick the rule at UPP that they feel is the most unnecessary, derogatory, or hurtful and write a letter to Principal Moore about why the rule should not exist.
 - **Extension:** Have students complete the same activity about their school.
- Culminating question: Look at the changes Ms. Hall made when she took over UPP (pg. 291-292). Do you believe her rules and environment are more conducive to learning? Are there rules you still have questions about? What other changes would you have liked to see made?

Points of View

- The author purposefully used multiple points of view in the book to show different perspectives of the school, crime, and characters. This is an important decision that he made because it truly shows how point of view changes perspective. The author stated, “For me, meeting these boys through the eyes of all the people that judge them and then reversing expectations when we meet them... the multiple perspectives really allowed us to peel back the layers of UPP and the D.C. community as a whole.”
- Have students get into small groups and give each group a character who is misjudged within the book. Ask the students to find multiple points of view about the same character and compare them. Have them then create a short presentation sharing:
 - What were the different points of view of the character?
 - How did the person’s identity change their point of view of the character?
 - What about their identity changed their point of view? Were they biased one way or another?
 - Which point of view, if any, were closest to the truth of the character?

Figurative Language

- There are examples of figurative language within the book, such as “My grandson is soft like dough” (page 114) and “I suddenly feel like my chair is molten lava” (page 280).
- Have students find other examples of figurative language throughout the book and complete two column notes with the left column having the piece of figurative language and the page number and the right column having the author’s intended meaning of the figurative language.
- Optional analysis question: What was the author’s purpose in including figurative language in his novel? What evidence supports your analysis of this?

Author Influences

- Nick Brooks has a background in film, teaching, and hip-hop, and these influences can be seen throughout the book.
- Have each student choose 3 different highlighters or 3 different color sticky notes and text mark their book showing when they can see each of these influences. In addition to the text marking, they should annotate in the margin or on the sticky note why they believe that instance was influenced by the author’s life. How does Brooks’s background help or hinder the novel as a whole?

This guide was created by Kellee Moyer, a middle school teacher-librarian in Orlando, FL. Kellee is the author of various teaching guides for all levels; the co-author of the blog [Unleashing Readers](#); a past committee member & chair of the Schneider Family Book Award and Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award; on the 2016-2018 ALAN Board of Directors; and a member of NCTE, ALAN, and ALA. Kellee can be reached at Kellee.Moye@gmail.com.