

## Because of Winn-Dixie Lesson Ideas

Before reading - have the students make predictions about setting, characters, and plot of the story based on the cover of the book.

Read 1st page - discuss author's use of "first-person" voice. Ask: Who is telling the story? What can you tell about Opal from the way she speaks? What do you think of the opening sentence? Does it make you want to read more? What are some things you would like to know about Opal? What are some things you would like to know about the dog? What other questions do you have about the story?

Record students' responses on chart paper or Smart Board to revisit later.

Read Chapters 1-3

During reading - chapter 1 - help readers draw on prior knowledge as they incorporate and assimilate new information from a text. Encourage students to make text-to-self connections between the story and their own lives. Ask questions such as the following to help students make meaningful connections:

- Does Opal remind you of anyone in your life? Who? Describe him or her.
- Opal compares her father, the preacher, to a "turtle hiding inside its shell, in there thinking about things and not ever sticking his head out into the world" (p. 16-17). Do you know anybody like that? Describe him or her.
- Opal is afraid that the preacher will get mad if she asks him about her mother. Have you ever been afraid to ask someone something? When?

Summarizing portions of the text during reading helps students identify main ideas and remember what they have read. Have students brainstorm a title that sums up the main idea and reflects plot, character, or mood of each chapter. For example, in Chapter One, Opal rescues Winn-Dixie from the pound and takes him home. Students might title the chapter "Opal Meets Winn-Dixie" or "Winn-Dixie: Lost and Found." Write the chapter titles on a large chart. When students have finished reading the book, prompt them to use the chapter titles to help them

recall and retell the story. You may also want to prompt students to summarize what happens "because of Winn-Dixie" as they read the novel. For example:

- Chapter Three: Because of Winn-Dixie, Opal finds the courage to ask her father about her mother and the preacher starts to come out of his shell.

Understanding characterization helps readers to explore the feelings, thoughts, and motivations of the characters. Review Chapter Four with the class and create a list of ten things Opal learns about her mother. Point out that list characterizes Opal's mother, giving the reader a sense of who Opal's mother is, even though she doesn't actually appear in the story. Ask: Do these ten things paint the whole picture of Opal's mother? What else might Opal want to know about her mother? What else would you like to know?

Have students create character collages for the characters. Their collages should include a drawing or sketch of each character framed by expressive adjectives (for example, *splendid* or *grand* as opposed to *good*) as well as phrases and sentences that describe the character's physical appearance, personality traits, and behaviors. Encourage students to use quotes from the book when possible. Use the collages to discuss what students know and would like to know about each character.

Point of view is the perspective from which a story is told. Because of Winn-Dixie is narrated in the first person by the main character. In the first-person point of view, everything the reader learns is through the perspective of one character. Have students experiment with point of view by retelling scenes from different characters' perspectives. For example, challenge students to retell the opening scene in which Opal meets Winn-Dixie in the grocery store from Winn-Dixie's perspective. How does a different perspective change the scene? What can we learn from Winn-Dixie's perspective that we can't learn from India Opal's?

Appreciating the author's craft helps students become better readers and writers. Conduct a mini-lesson that explores the vivid language Kate DiCamillo uses to describe her characters. Explain that a simile is a direct comparison of two things that are usually not alike. Similes use words such as *like* or *as* to make the

comparison. Writers use similes to help us see things in new, often surprising, ways. For example, Kate DiCamillo writes that Winn-Dixie "looked like a piece of old brown carpet that had been left out in the rain" (p.11). Have students note in a journal the similes they encounter as they read. Discuss these similes and the images they evoke. Help students visualize these similes by folding a piece of paper in half, then drawing the objects being compared on either side of the fold. Encourage students to write and illustrate their own similes that describe a favorite character.

Vocabulary - encourage students to note unfamiliar words in a Word Log and try to define them from the context of the story. Use words from students' Word Logs as often as possible in class discussions, and encourage students to look and listen for these words outside class. You may want to preview the following words before reading:

missionary (p.13)

exception (p. 15)

peculiar (p. 47)

identical (p. 61)

pathological (p. 76)

roundabout (p. 91)

imitated (p. 92)

notion (p. 105)

melancholy (p. 121)

amuse (p. 151)

complicated (p. 153)

wheezed (p. 175)

After reading - Open-ended questions encourage students to think critically about the book's themes. Cross-curricular activities help extend students' understanding of the story through writing, art, drama, science, geography, and math activities.

## Discussion Questions

### Family

- How would you describe Opal's relationship with her father at the beginning of the book? How does their relationship change by the end of the book?
- Why do you think the preacher cries when he and Opal can't find Winn-Dixie?

- At the end of the book, Opal imagines that she is speaking to her mother and says, "I miss you, but my heart doesn't feel empty anymore. It's full all the way up." What does Opal mean? Why do her feelings about her mother change?

### Love, Friendship, and Community

- Do you think *Because of Winn-Dixie* is a good title for this novel? Why or why not? How does Winn-Dixie change Opal's life? How does Opal change Winn-Dixie's life?
- Because Gloria doesn't see well, she tells Opal to "tell me everything about yourself, so as I can see you with my heart" (p. 66). What does she mean by this? What do you think it means to see someone with your heart? How is that different from seeing with your eyes?
- What does Opal learn about friendship? What did you learn about friendship from reading *Because of Winn-Dixie*?
- How do the people in Naomi act like a community? In what ways is Naomi, Florida, like your community? In what ways is it different? Encourage students to notice differences and similarities in race and class, as well as the ways people treat and help one another.

### Understanding the Characters

- Opal often finds that her first impression of the people she meets is not always accurate. Choose a character from the book and describe how Opal's impression of him or her changes by the end of the story. What causes Opal's impression to change?
- Gloria says that she made mistakes before she learned "the most important thing" (p.96). What do you think Gloria means by "the most important thing"? Why does Gloria say that "the most important thing" is different for everyone?
- Kate DiCamillo says, "I love strange names and I love making them up." Names often contain other meanings and can influence a reader's perception of a character. Choose a character with an interesting name. Is

there a story behind the character's name or nickname? Does the name influence the way you see and understand the character? Does the name reflect the character's personality and character traits?

- Why do you think Otis kept on playing music even after the police told him to stop? What do you think Otis means when he tells Opal that "the music is better if someone is listening to it" (p. 130)?
- At the end of the book, Opal observes that Amanda no longer looks "pinch-faced" (p. 182). What causes Opal to see Amanda differently?

### Loneliness and Sorrow

- Why is Opal lonely when she first moves to Naomi, Florida? In what ways does Opal deal with her loneliness?
- Opal tells Winn-Dixie that they are a lot alike. In what ways are Opal and Winn-Dixie alike? In what ways are they different?
- How does the Littmus Lozenge taste to Opal? The preacher? Gloria? Amanda? Otis? Why does the Littmus Lozenge taste different to each character who tastes it?