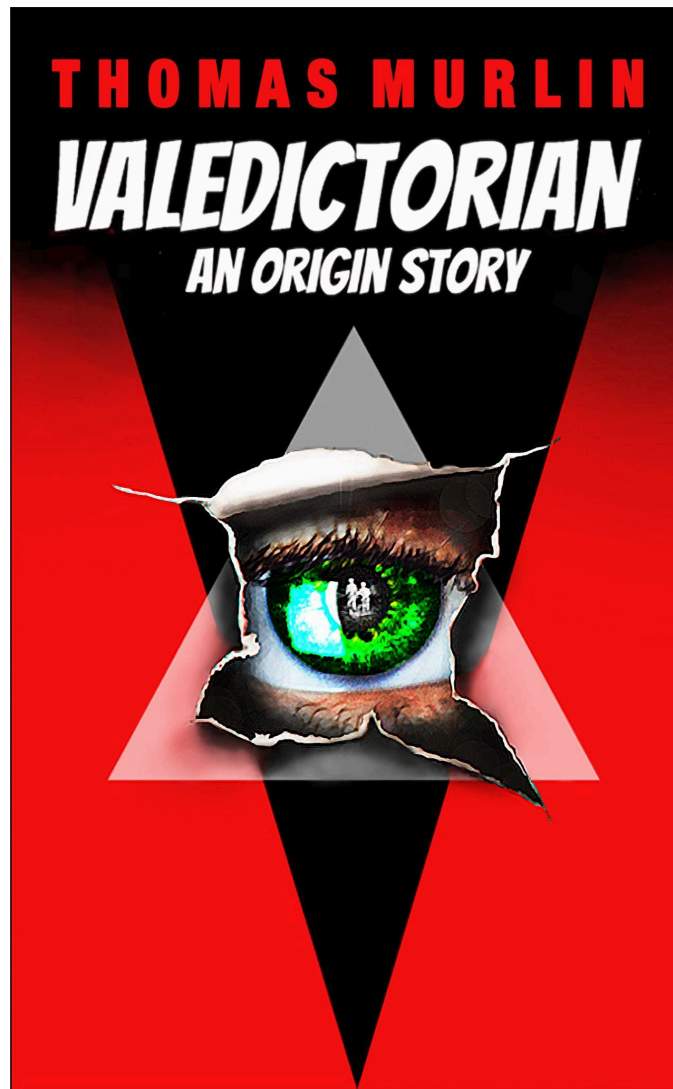


# ***VALEDICTORIAN: AN ORIGIN STORY***

## **Curriculum & Instruction Guide**

**Grades 8–12**

**Aligned to the New York State Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards**



# Welcome

Thank you for choosing ***Valedictorian: An Origin Story*** for your classroom.

Written by veteran English teacher Thomas Murlin, *Valedictorian* was crafted with today's students and classrooms in mind. Combining literary fiction, psychological suspense, coming-of-age storytelling, and high-concept mystery, the novel invites readers to examine identity, memory, truth, resilience, and the choices that define who we become.

This curriculum guide equips educators with standards-aligned lessons, engaging discussion questions, meaningful writing assignments, and differentiated instructional strategies that encourage students to think critically, support their ideas with textual evidence, and make authentic connections between literature and their own lives.

Whether taught as a full-class novel, literature circle selection, independent reading experience, or companion text alongside canonical works, *Valedictorian* provides students with opportunities to analyze complex characters, interpret symbolism, debate ethical dilemmas, and explore timeless questions about courage, responsibility, and self-discovery.

## About the Novel

### Genre

Young Adult Literary Fiction

Contemporary Fantasy

Coming-of-Age Fiction

Psychological Mystery

### Recommended Grade Levels

8–12

### Approximate Reading Time

3–6 weeks depending on instructional pacing.

# Why Teach *Valedictorian*?

Today's students deserve contemporary novels that challenge them intellectually while remaining deeply engaging.

*Valedictorian* combines a compelling narrative with rich literary craftsmanship, making it equally suited for independent reading and rigorous classroom study. Throughout the novel, students encounter layered symbolism, evolving themes, moral ambiguity, and an unreliable narrator whose journey encourages readers to question assumptions and evaluate evidence.

The novel invites meaningful classroom discussion surrounding identity, empathy, memory, trauma, perseverance, friendship, family, leadership, responsibility, and the consequences of our choices.

Its blend of literary depth and accessible storytelling makes it an ideal bridge between contemporary young adult literature and classic works traditionally taught in secondary English classrooms.

## Big Ideas

### Identity & Self-Discovery

- What defines a person's identity?
- Can people change who they are, or do they simply become more of who they already are?
- How do our experiences shape our sense of self?
- How do others influence the way we see ourselves?
- Can someone truly know themselves?

### Choice, Responsibility & Consequences

- Are our lives determined by fate, or by the choices we make?
- Can people overcome the circumstances they inherit?
- What responsibilities accompany intelligence, talent, or power?
- How do small choices shape the course of our lives?
- Can one decision change everything?

## **Truth, Memory & Perspective**

- How reliable are our memories?
- How does perspective influence our understanding of truth?
- Can two people experience the same event but remember it differently?
- What role does truth play in personal growth?
- Is there ever only one version of the truth?

## **Fear, Courage & Resilience**

- How do fear and uncertainty influence decision-making?
- What is the difference between courage and fearlessness?
- How does adversity reveal character?
- Can hardship become a source of strength?
- What helps people persevere through difficult circumstances?

## **Relationships & Humanity**

- How do relationships shape who we become?
- How do trust and betrayal influence our decisions?
- What do we owe the people we care about?
- How do empathy and compassion shape our actions?
- What makes someone a true friend?

## **Morality & Ethics**

- What separates right from wrong when the answer isn't clear?
- Are good people capable of making harmful choices?
- Can someone's intentions justify their actions?
- What does it mean to be a hero?
- Is doing the right thing always the hardest choice?

## **Author's Craft & Literature**

These are especially useful for an English classroom because they bridge theme and literary analysis.

- Why do authors leave some questions unanswered?
- How does an unreliable narrator affect the reader's understanding of a story?

- How do symbols deepen a novel's meaning?
- Why are readers drawn to mystery and uncertainty?
- How does setting influence a story's mood and themes?

## Essential Questions

- What makes someone a hero?
- Can identity change over time?
- How do our choices shape our future?
- When can memory be trusted?
- Why do people hide the truth?
- How does adversity reveal character?
- How does perspective influence truth?
- What responsibilities accompany extraordinary ability or potential?

## Enduring Understandings

Students will understand that...

- Identity is shaped through experience, relationships, and personal choice.
- Every decision carries consequences that influence both ourselves and others.
- Courage often requires vulnerability.
- Truth is frequently more complex than appearances suggest.
- Perspective influences how events are understood.
- Literature helps us better understand ourselves and others.
- Resilience develops through adversity.
- Personal growth requires self-reflection and accountability.

## Social-Emotional Learning Connections

*Valedictorian* naturally supports instruction in social-emotional learning by encouraging students to examine:

- Self-awareness
- Responsible decision-making
- Relationship skills
- Social awareness
- Empathy
- Perseverance

- Resilience
- Integrity
- Belonging
- Identity formation

## **Themes**

Major themes include:

- Identity
- Memory
- Truth
- Family
- Friendship
- Courage
- Responsibility
- Sacrifice
- Good versus Evil
- Leadership
- Fear
- Belonging
- Redemption
- Hope
- Resilience

## **Literary Elements**

Students analyze:

- Characterization
- Dynamic Characters
- Symbolism
- Motifs
- Suspense
- Foreshadowing
- Irony
- Allegory
- Parallel Plotlines
- Flashback

- Point of View
- Unreliable Narration
- Figurative Language
- Theme Development

## **Skills Developed**

By completing this unit, students will:

- Cite strong textual evidence.
- Analyze character development.
- Trace multiple themes across the novel.
- Interpret symbolism and figurative language.
- Evaluate an author's craft and purpose.
- Participate in collaborative academic discussions.
- Construct analytical and argumentative essays.
- Present ideas using evidence from the text.
- Reflect on literature through personal and societal lenses.

# Alignment to the New York State Next Generation ELA Learning Standards

This instructional guide is aligned with the New York State Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards for grades 8–12. Lessons and assessments emphasize:

- Close reading of complex literary texts
- Evidence-based discussion and writing
- Critical thinking and textual analysis
- Vocabulary acquisition in context
- Research and inquiry
- Speaking and listening skills
- Narrative, informative, and argumentative writing
- Reflection and metacognition

| Unit Component                                | Standards              |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Close Reading                                 | 9–10R1, R2, R3, R4     |
| Literary Analysis                             | 9–10R2, R3, R5, W2, W9 |
| Socratic Seminar                              | 9–10SL1, R1, R2        |
| Comparative Unit ( <i>Lord of the Flies</i> ) | 9–10R8, W1, W9         |
| Narrative Writing                             | 9–10W3, W4, W5         |
| Research Project                              | 9–10W7, W8, W9         |
| Vocabulary Study                              | 9–10L4, L5, L6         |

## Standards Addressed in *Valedictorian: An Origin Story*

### Reading (Literature)

9–10R1



Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly and implicitly, make logical inferences, and develop questions for deeper understanding.

### **How students demonstrate mastery in this unit**

- Close reading activities
  - Text annotation
  - Socratic Seminar
  - Literary analysis essays
  - Evidence-based discussion
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### **9–10R2**

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped by specific details; summarize the text objectively.

Students examine themes including

- Identity
  - Truth
  - Memory
  - Courage
  - Responsibility
  - Belonging
  - Choice versus circumstance
- 

### **9–10R3**

Analyze how complex characters develop, interact with other characters, advance the plot, and contribute to the development of themes.

Students analyze

- Jack
- Ryan
- Clare
- Alan

- Ben
- Supporting characters

through character tracking and evidence-based discussion.

#### **9–10R4**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases, including figurative and connotative meanings, and analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

Students investigate

- figurative language
  - symbolism
  - imagery
  - tone
  - diction
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#### **9–10R5**

Analyze how an author's choices concerning structure contribute to meaning, aesthetic impact, and reader engagement.

Students analyze

- nonlinear storytelling
  - chapter organization
  - foreshadowing
  - pacing
  - suspense
  - the framing device
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#### **9–10R6**

Analyze how point of view and perspective shape the content and style of a literary work.

Students evaluate

- unreliable narration
- memory

- perception
- bias
- reader expectations

### **9–10R8**

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics to build knowledge or compare the approaches the authors take.

Companion lessons compare *Valedictorian* with

- *Lord of the Flies*
- Shakespeare
- selected informational texts
- contemporary YA literature

## **Writing Standards**

### **9–10W1**

Write arguments supported by claims, evidence, and reasoning.

Students compose

- literary arguments
  - thematic essays
  - evidence-based responses
- 

### **9–10W2**

Write informative and explanatory texts that clearly examine and convey ideas.

Students write

- literary analyses
- character analyses
- theme analyses

### **9–10W3**

Write narratives using effective technique, sequencing, and description.

Students create

- alternate endings
  - character journals
  - scene rewrites
  - origin stories
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#### **9–10W4**

Produce clear and coherent writing appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

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#### **9–10W5**

Develop and strengthen writing through planning, revising, editing, and rewriting.

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#### **9–10W6**

Use technology to produce, publish, and collaborate on writing.

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#### **9–10W7**

Conduct short and sustained research projects to answer questions or solve problems.

Potential research topics include

- Memory and cognition
- Hero archetypes
- Psychological resilience
- Shakespearean influence
- Ethics in leadership

#### **9–10W8**

Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative sources while integrating information effectively and avoiding plagiarism.

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### **9–10W9**

Draw evidence from literary and informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

## **Speaking and Listening**

### **9–10SL1**

Initiate and participate effectively in collaborative discussions.

Students participate in

- Socratic Seminars
  - Literature Circles
  - Small-group discussions
  - Fishbowl discussions
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### **9–10SL2**

Integrate information presented in diverse media and formats while evaluating credibility and accuracy.

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### **9–10SL4**

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly and logically.

Students deliver

- literary presentations
- multimedia projects
- thematic analyses

# Language

## **9-10L3**

Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts and to make effective choices for meaning and style.

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## **9-10L4**

Determine or clarify the meanings of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases.

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## **9-10L5**

Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in meaning.

# Chapter 1: The Interview

## Lesson Focus: How Authors Hook Readers

### Essential Question

**How can an author capture a reader's attention before the main story even begins?**

### Literary Focus

Students will analyze how an author establishes:

- Setting
- Mood
- Imagery
- Narration
- Point of View
- Suspense
- The Hook

## Great Novels Begin with Questions

Before reading, ask students: think of a book, television show, or movie that immediately grabbed your attention.

**What made you want to keep going?**

Record responses.

Students usually identify:

- mystery
- unusual setting
- conflict
- unanswered questions

Tell students:

Today we're going to study **how** an author builds those elements—not just enjoy the story.

# Student Activity #1: Literary Detective Hunt

*Instead of simply reading for plot, become a literary detective. Use clues, close reading, and critical thinking to uncover themes, character motivations, symbolism, and the deeper meaning of the text.*

## Setting

Where does the story begin?

List details about the setting.

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How does the setting affect your expectations?

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## Mood

Circle the words that best describe the atmosphere.

- ☐ hopeful
- ☐ mysterious
- ☐ tense
- ☐ uncomfortable
- ☐ exciting
- ☐ calm
- ☐ suspenseful
- ☐ confusing

Choose one additional word.

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What specific words or details helped create that mood?

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### **Imagery**

Find three descriptions that helped you picture the scene.

Quote or summarize them.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Which description was most effective? Why?

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### **Narration**

How would you describe the narrator? Reliable? Uncertain? Confident? Objective? Emotional? Support your answer with evidence.

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### **Hook**

What made you want to continue reading? Rank these from most effective to least effective.

\_\_\_ dialogue

\_\_\_ mystery

\_\_\_ characters

\_\_\_ setting

\_\_\_ suspense

\_\_\_ unanswered questions

\_\_\_ voice

Explain your choices.

# Student Activity #2: Author's Craft Color Annotation

## Directions

As you read **Chapter 1**, annotate the text using the color key below. Your goal is to identify **how** the author builds the opening chapter—not just what happens.

### Blue – Setting

Highlight details that establish where and when the story takes place or help you visualize the environment.

- Where are we? What details help me picture the setting? How does the setting influence my expectations?
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### Yellow – Mood & Atmosphere

Highlight words, phrases, or passages that create a particular feeling or emotional atmosphere.

- What emotions does this scene create? Which words contribute to that mood? How does the mood change throughout the chapter?
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### Green – Characterization & Narration

Highlight moments that reveal information about the narrator or other characters.

- What do I learn about Jack? What do I infer rather than know? How does the narrator shape my understanding of events?
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### Purple – Imagery

Highlight descriptive language that appeals to your senses or creates a vivid mental picture.

- What can I see, hear, feel, smell, or imagine? Which descriptions stand out most?

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## Pink – The Hook

Highlight passages that make you want to keep reading.

These might include: unanswered questions, surprising information, unusual dialogue, moments of tension, unexpected details

- Why did the author include this moment? How does it build curiosity?
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## After Reading

Working with a partner, compare your annotations.

Discuss:

1. Which color appeared most often? Why?
2. Which literary element was most effective in drawing you into the story?
3. Which passage best demonstrates the author's craft? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
4. What questions are you left with after Chapter 1?
5. How does the chapter prepare readers for the rest of the novel?

## Teacher Discussion Prompt

After students compare annotations, ask:

**If you could remove one of these five elements—setting, mood, characterization/narration, imagery, or the hook—which would hurt the chapter the most? Defend your answer with textual evidence.**

This question encourages students to think about how the elements work together rather than in isolation and naturally leads into a discussion of author's craft. It's also an excellent evidence-based discussion that aligns well with the analytical focus of the unit.

# Student Activity #3: Chapter 1 Reading Comprehension Questions

*Directions: Answer the following questions in complete sentences. Support your responses with evidence from the text.*

## Understanding the Text

1. Where does Chapter 1 begin, and how does the setting immediately establish the tone of the novel? Cite one specific detail from the text.

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2. What is your first impression of Jack? Identify one quotation that helped shape your opinion and explain why.

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3. Throughout Chapter 1, the interviewer asks Jack a series of questions. What do these questions suggest about Jack's situation? Support your response with two pieces of textual evidence.

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4. What information does the author intentionally withhold from readers during Chapter 1? Why might the author choose to reveal information gradually instead of immediately explaining everything?

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5. Find one quotation that creates suspense. Explain how the quotation encourages readers to continue reading.

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7. The novel opens with dialogue rather than action. How does this choice affect the reader's understanding of the story? Support your answer with evidence.

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8. Identify one descriptive passage that creates a vivid image. How does this imagery contribute to the mood of the chapter?

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9. Which question raised in Chapter 1 do you think is the most important? Why?

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### **Literary Analysis**

10. How does the setting contribute to the mystery surrounding Jack? Use evidence from the chapter.

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11. How does the narrator influence what readers know—and do not know—about the story? What effect does this have on the reader?

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12. Identify one example of foreshadowing or a clue that you believe may become important later in the novel. Explain your reasoning.

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13. One purpose of an opening chapter is to "hook" the reader. Identify two techniques the author uses to capture the reader's attention. Support each technique with evidence from the chapter.

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14. Based only on Chapter 1, what prediction can you make about the novel? Use at least three pieces of evidence from the chapter to support your prediction.